**Standards-Based Grading**

February 15, 2010 Shawn

It dawned on my one day during my undergraduate work in physics that I was going to be a teacher. I knew that I wouldn’t be able tolerate the molasses-slow, competition-riddled life of a laboratory physicist. However, I loved something about science. I knew that I was frustrated with how my educational row had been hoed. I began thinking about how I would do it differently. How I would reach my students with compassion and ground-breaking pedagogy. How I would empathize, lift-up, and otherwise be as genuine as possible with young people.

Two years and a Master’s degree later, I got my own classroom. I tried compassion, and was met with indifference by students. I tried ground-breaking pedagogy and was met with a lukewarm reception. I tried to empathize, lift-up, and being genuine, only to be really really tired on Friday.

I learned that my classroom atmosphere, and thought patterns of students weren’t going to change unless some very fundamental things about school changed. I plan to write about these things in detail, but I want to address the most fundamental today:

**Grades**

Grades are the reporting tool we use to communicate with students, parents, and other academic institutions about the quality of our products. So what would it mean if these were meaningless, inflated, or otherwise uncommunicative? Disaster, that’s what. Short of being alarmist, I would argue that this is what we have going today. Our grades are [polluted](http://mctownsley.blogspot.com/2010/02/grading-pollution.html" \o "MeTA - Grading Pollution" \t "_blank); an “A” will be given out just to say, “Aw, you showed up today.” I’ve done it.

As I progressed through my first year of teaching, I began to work up to those things that I valued most. I began to become quite curt and frank with my students in order to blanch them into thinking a bit more. However, I needed to change something more fundamental, when along comes one of those conversations you see in movies. A pivotal moment where our hero learns something from a supporting character, and his motive is given new life.

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So simple was the change, yet so genuinely revolutionary it was for my classroom. The conversation goes like this,

M: “What do the grades in your gradebook mean to students and parents?”  
S: “Not much I suppose, I mean the kids took the test, shouldn’t they remember what was on it?”  
M: “Maybe. But do they?”  
S: “No.”  
M: “What if you put your content standards in the gradebook and graded proficiency with specific ideas, rather than indexing by assessment tool?”  
S: “Well, that would mean that students and parents would have a running record of their student’s understandings of the major topics in the course. They would know where they were proficient and lacking. I could use that information to edit my teaching, and they could use it to edit their studying.”  
M: “Yup, ‘Quiz 3′ doesn’t mean much, but ‘Can Distribute Polynomial’ with a 1-10 by it sure does.”  
S: “OMG. I think I need to go to the bathroom.”

That’s the idea in a nutshell. Why are you reporting cryptic titles like “Test 4″ and “Unit Quiz 1.2?” Those tests and quizzes, or whatever assessment tools you use, are aimed at testing content standards, so stop destroying information by adding the scores, and just report proficiency by standard!

The thrill of having a high schooler walk in to your room and say the following should be enough to bring you into the fold:

“Mr. Cornally, I was looking at my grades, and I’m pretty sure I need to work on the quotient rule. Then, I think I should do a problem like the one of the quiz to show you I get it.”

So simple, so powerful. This student worked on the standard they needed to work on because it was the only 4/10 in their grade record. They now understand the quotient rule, even though it was assessed simultaneously with the product, power, and chain rule.

More to come on the logistics of running a standards-based gradebook. I promise to model how it would look in the majority of content areas. Think I will avert my gaze from you, English? Not hardly.